



# Iconic Fashions

Cambridge museum marks Canada's 150th birthday with a fashionable flourish



Lynn Haddrall

**Y**ou can discover clothes older than Canada in a former Cambridge post office, a treasure trove to help celebrate the nation's 150th birthday this year.

Jonathan Walford and Kenn Norman collected the iconic pieces for the Fashion History Museum they co-founded. They plan to exhibit some special pieces as a tribute to 150 years of Canadian style, celebrating achievements ranging from beaver pelts and Cowichan sweaters to the wire hangar and Wonderbra.

The couple had just closed the fashion museum for the 2016 season when we talked about the stylish shows scheduled this year. One of their three gallery spaces will be devoted to an exhibition titled

Fashioning Canada Since 1867.

Walford's wide knowledge of fashion is enlightening. Consider this concept: shopping as a way to build a nation.

"More than any other country in the world, Canada has relied upon the department store as a form of nationalism," Walford says.

"Whether you lived in Nova Scotia or the interior of B.C., you got the same Eaton's catalogue; the same products were available. Eaton's was primarily the main one, followed by Simpsons, which was mostly in Ontario, and Hudson's

Bay, which was Western Canada. Those were the three big ones that really unified Canada through merchandising and shopping, so it was nationalism through shopping."

Although big department stores defined much of the country's early retail years, women still produced garments at home, sewing their own clothes. This will be another theme in the birthday exhibition, the rise of the home sewing machine and dressmaking from patterns.

Walford says Canada was the largest manufacturer of sewing machines outside of the U.S. from 1868 to 1875, and there was a massive sewing machine industry in Hamilton.

Early Canadian retail stores often

combined imported goods and dressmaking materials.

You would go to the stores where you could buy your accessories – shawls and purses and stockings – off the shelf. You could buy yardage of laces and things like that. And then you could also have your dresses made and coats made," Walford says.

The Made in Canada concept will run throughout the exhibition.

Although many goods related to clothing were manufactured in Waterloo Region, Canada wasn't known for its fashion design.

"We didn't rely upon our own talent to design our look. We borrowed, knocked off what was happening in Paris and Europe. It was influenced by it. We usually were copies of copies of copies," says Walford.

It wasn't until after the Second World War that Canadian designers began to emerge.

"It really took off with the boutique movement in the 1960s. You had Marilyn Brooks and Pat McDonagh opening their own little shops and those were the places that really defined the Canadian style and created a Canadian design esthetic."

The museum will feature a section of Canadian Firsts, showcasing innovations such as the wire hangar, the athletic supporter – the cup, not the strap – and bulky wool sweaters. Canadian fashion icons such as Elizabeth Arden, Rosemary



The Fashioning Canada Since 1867 exhibition will include a gala gown circa 1954 by Toronto couturier David Artibello. PHOTOGRAPHY • JONATHON WALFORD

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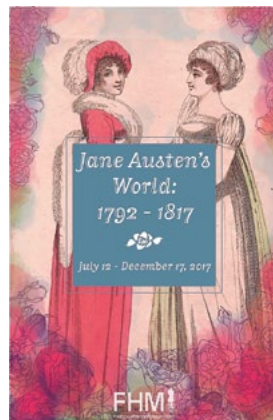
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Fashion History Museum co-founders Kenn Norman (left) and Jonathan Walford have some fun while preparing for this year's Dior exhibition at their museum in a former post office in the Hespeler section of Cambridge.

PHOTOGRAPHY • JONATHON WALFORD



Three posters illustrate the wide range of fashion that will be explored at the Fashion History Museum this year.

Reid, Arnold Scaasi, Dsquared2 (twin brothers Dean and Dan Caten), Patrick Cox, and Linda Evangelista will be recognized.

Fashioning Canada will run all year at the museum, with special activities and events throughout 2017. Walford thinks the most historically significant piece might be the Trudeau-mania paper dress from the 1968 Liberal Convention, but offers a glimpse at some of the other fascinating pieces on display:

- a Voyageur-style snowshoeing suit from the 1890s worn in Ottawa;
- early Hudson Bay Company blanket coats and garments, including a ski suit from the 1920s;
- examples of high-fashion styles from leading Toronto and Montreal dressmakers from the turn of the century to the 1950s;
- a representation of Canadian designer fashions since the 1960s.

If you have not visited the Fashion History Museum, you will find it nestled in the former Hespeler section of Cambridge. It's just 3,000 square feet, but has a footprint that's growing globally thanks to the passion of Walford and Norman. They spent a decade searching for a permanent home to showcase pieces they have lovingly collected over the years.

The pair considered larger cities, such as Toronto or Victoria, but Cambridge checked off a lot of things they were looking for, including a chance to be part of a community that's transforming from a historic manufacturing powerhouse to a high-tech hub. They realized their dream for a permanent museum space when they opened the Fashion History Museum in June 2015.

"It has been quite a journey because we've been looking for over a decade," Norman says. He handles the business side of the museum and chairs the board for the federally incorporated registered charity. Walford is director and curator.

"We have a travelling gallery, but were fortunate to actually find a home that would encompass every need for not

only the museum but to be part of the community."

Norman credits their landlord for wanting to find a unique tenant for the former post office, one who would give back to the community.

They began renovations with a special one-time economic development grant of \$45,000 from the Region of Waterloo, but now rely on donors and volunteers to fund the operations. They have 1,300 members, some from outside the country, who also contribute financially. They would like to see more municipal support in the future.

The Cambridge site appealed to Walford because it has potential to grow.

"One of the best things we liked about this was its central location. If you look on a map we are pretty much in the centre, between Guelph and Galt and Waterloo. We're right off the 401, so people who are driving through the region can find us quite easily. We are three minutes from the highway and halfway between Toronto and Stratford. Within 40 minutes of our front door there are a million people."

When they discussed the new location with municipal officials, they emphasized the economic development potential "because we didn't want to be insular."

Their national and international connections continue to grow. A phone call from the House of Dior led to the second of three exhibitions planned this year.

2017 is the 70th anniversary of the Dior fashion moment known as "the new look." The company is cataloguing as many archival pieces as it can. The House of Dior contacted Walford to find out how many gowns the museum has collected.

"We supplied all the information we had on our collection and then I got to know their liaison for that project," he recalls. "They authenticated what we had and confirmed which collections they were from and that was how we got into it. It was wonderful to have that sort of connection with the House of Dior. We're still working with them."

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The 2017 exhibition focuses on the first 15 years (1947 to 1962) under designers Christian Dior and Yves Saint Laurent. There will be about a dozen garments on display including the quintessential Dior gown silhouette.

Walford thinks it's important to go beyond the designs and also talk about how masterfully Dior handled the business.

"More than being a designer, he was really good at understanding how women bought clothes and what they wanted. He created these diffusion lines before people called it ready-to-wear or prêt-à-porter. He was doing knock-offs of his own things."

The museum will explore how Dior invented that system.

"They all looked to him as the father of this trickle-down fashion. He was in control of that, so he made the money, which is very bright."

The third big event at the museum this year marks another milestone: 200 years since the death of novelist Jane Austen. The museum will debut an exhibition in July called *The World of Jane Austen*, focusing on 1792 to 1817.

"It is quite a good collection and a well-rounded collection. It's not just about Jane Austen; it's about the 'world' of Jane Austen, so we have interesting dresses from that period that are Canadian, American, Dutch, French, English and Swiss," says Walford.

"That whole period is kind of the same silhouette; there's not a big change from 1792 to 1817 – high waist, narrow skirt, and there's a gradual shift from one end of it to the other end of it. That's what we will be showing – 25 years when fashion doesn't change dramatically, it's just gradually through the evolution of style – partly because it was such a mixed-up period."

It's an example of how people focus differently in periods of strife and war. At that time, it was the Napoleonic wars. You can see the same thing in fashion during the Second World War.

"It's hard to distinguish between 1940 and 1945," says Walford. "It's the same thing from 1795 to 1817. There are little clues; it's subtle but that's what's interesting – why it didn't change dramatically and how did it differ?"

With the 2017 exhibitions underway, Norman and Walford are looking to future projects, such as a footwear fetish collector show planned for 2019. It's an opportunity to have some fun and be a little risqué.

They're also looking forward to 2020. They both wear fashionable spectacles and can't resist planning an eyeglass exhibition for that year. "It will be 20-20 after all," Walford quips.

The Fashion History Museum is an all-consuming project for this couple, but they both consult for other organizations and Norman works as a life coach. They live in a 1940s Cape Cod home in the former Galt section of Cambridge. It's the most modern place they have ever lived. They opted for low maintenance over the demanding Victorian houses they previously preferred.

There's not much time for gardening or yard work at home when the museum takes centre stage in their busy lives.

"In the museum world, there are these massive museums like The Met and they are these iconic institutions," Walford says. "But then there's all these little ones like us. We need to talk more; we are like the second string of museums, but we are usually more local."

As word spreads of the Fashion History Museum's artifacts and archives, they get

more attention from outside the country, including day visits from international guests attending conferences in Toronto.

"They make a point of bringing a whole busload of delegates here to the museum. We had leading people from across the world, Nigeria, Thailand, people whose books we have read and have in our archives," says Norman.

One recent international example was the Google Cultural Institute, an online initiative cataloguing museums around the world. Norman and Walford met with representatives in Toronto to discuss their participation in the project.

"It's quite a remarkable public experience and fairly intense because they anticipate as much as 20 million views of that in the first year," Norman says. "That kind of attention brought into any community could really make a very dramatic impact on the public

#### FASHION HISTORY MUSEUM

- The Fashion History Museum is at 74 Queen St. E. in the Hespeler section of Cambridge.
- For details about the exhibitions and museum hours: [fashionhistorymuseum.com](http://fashionhistorymuseum.com)
- To learn more about the House of Dior's 70 years of haute couture, go to [www.dior.com](http://www.dior.com) and scroll down for the link to La Maison Dior > The Story of Dior
- For more information about Google Cultural Institute's global initiative go to: [www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta](http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta)

reputation and public persona of that community.

"We knew it was important to do that. That's the kind of work we do. Even though we are small, we have visions that are big."

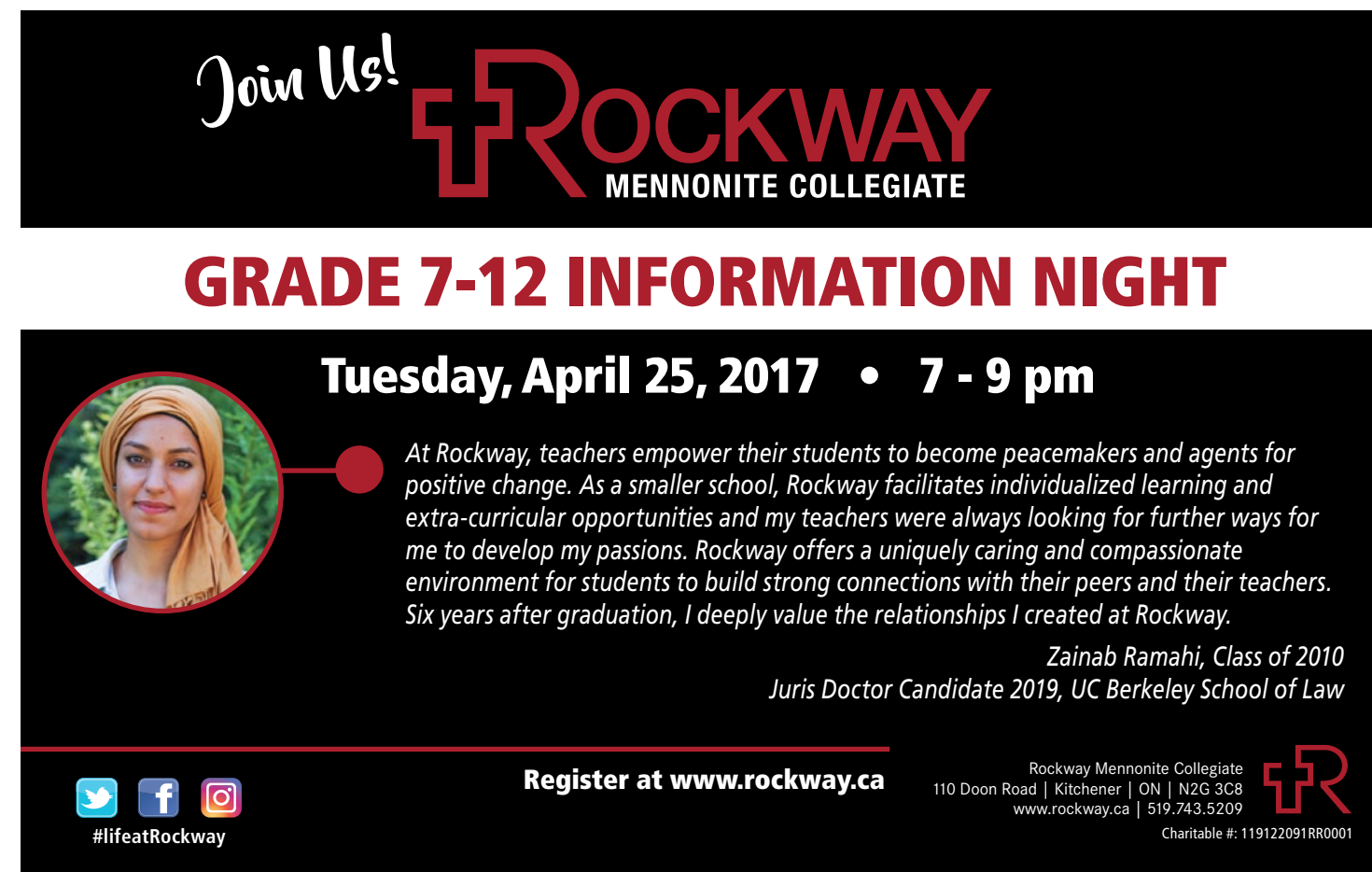
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